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Western and Indian theories of consciousness confronted

A comparative overview of continental and analytic philosophy with Advaita Vedanta and Madhyamaka Buddhism

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Abstract

The burgeoning field of cognitive studies in the West is motivated by a renewed interest in conscious experience, which arose in the postmodern zeitgeist in response to the positivist, scientific ideal of objectivity. This work presents a historical overview of Western philosophy from its dawn, focusing on the evolution of key concepts in metaphysics, ontology and epistemology, to arrive at the examination of modern theories on consciousness.

The monist systems of pre-Socratic philosophers, the empiricism and rationalism of the Humanism, Kant's critique and the post-Kantian split of traditions in the analytic and continental branches are surveyed. A summary of the key historical concepts of consciousness in the continental tradition, and especially in German idealism and phenomenology is presented. Modern physicalist theories of mind based on epistemological realism, in the analytic tradition are sketched, and critical aspects of the realist viewpoint discussed. The reintroduction of the phenomenal perspective in philosophy of mind, is argued, represents an important turning point in analytic philosophy.

In the second part, the philosophic-religious traditions of Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism, in its Madhyamaka branch, are presented, and their respective notions of self, mind and reality confronted. The concept of consciousness as an ontological substance is, in Buddhism, deconstructed through the analysis of impermanence and interdependent origination of phenomena. In Advaita philosophy consciousness is equated with the universal Brahman, although no duality is admitted between Brahman and the world. The phenomenological analysis of self in this tradition differs from the Western notion of "transcendental ego" through an understanding of intentionality as a superimposition of subject-object duality on pure consciousness. A core theory of nonduality between the conscious principle and the world is then extracted from the apparently opposite ontological stances of Mahayana and Advaita.

This theory is finally compared with the Western idealist and realist conceptions of consciousness, intentionality and subject-object duality. The nondualism of the Indian systems, is argued, represents a possible resolution of the ontological and epistemological problems of Western philosophy.

Keywords: consciousness, nonduality, phenomenology, Advaita Vedanta, Madhyamaka Buddhism, epistemology.

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PART I

To the best of our current knowledge there is no thing, no indivisible entity that is us, neither in the brain nor in some metaphysical realm beyond this world. So when we speak of conscious experience as a subjective phenomenon, what is the entity having these experiences?

Thomas Metzinger

For anyone who at the end of Western philosophy can and must still question philosophically, the decisive question is no longer merely "What basic character do beings manifest?" or "How may the being of beings be characterized?" but "What is this 'being' itself?"

Martin Heidegger

The ego in its purity is experienced in the interval between two states or between two thoughts. You should realize this interval as the abiding, unchangeable reality, your true Being.

Ramana Maharshi

1. INTRODUCTION

Historical background

The main topic investigated in this study is consciousness. This emerges throughout the evolution of Western and Eastern philosophy as a pivotal issue, reflecting the dominant conception of life, self and reality.

Philosophic inquiry started in the West as an analysis of the notion of being, or existence in se. This was considered an absolute dimension transcending the human mind, without possibility of definition, and accessible only through intuition. Already in pre-Socratic philosophy, however, solutions were sought to harmonize this metaphysical dimension with the manifest world of matter and change. An idealist current, which can be traced back to Plato, underlined the non-physical and transcendent character of being, while a realist one, associated with Aristotle, focused on a more objective and empirical study of particulars as constituents of existence. These conceptions were later transposed in Christian theology through the assimilation of being with God; the Patristic tradition adopted Platonism as its philosophical foundation, while Aristotelianism became prevalent in Scholastic theology. After the decline of Scholasticism, the philosophic notion of being was set aside and, in the Humanism, was replaced by that of consciousness intended as the subjective mind (*sec. e.g.* Locke and Descartes). The assimilation of consciousness with subjectivity crystallized a shift from a "logocentric" to an "anthropocentric" ontology, based on the definition of man as the subject and reference point of epistemic knowledge. This resulted in a dualism which generated the subsidiary problems of investigating the interaction between mind and body and consciousness and world. The inquiry of the natural world became considered, in time, as an independent, empirical enterprise, separable from metaphysical or theological principles, and even objective or observer-independent. Under the aegis of materialism, in the beginning of the 20th century, consciousness itself came to be finally negated in positivist philosophy, through the adoption of so called eliminativist theories.

The modern philosophical analysis of consciousness is mainly dominated by two alternative conceptions, an objective (empirical-realist) and subjective (rationalist-idealist). In the first, the mind is regarded as a mechanistic feature outcome of the body's physiology, in the second as a subjective, "introspectable" element implying a substance-dualism. The distinction between the continental and analytic philosophic traditions, and the corresponding divide between humanistic and scientific disciplines, reflect the adoption of a subjective/ideal or an objective/empirical approach respectively. Both philosophical stances present theoretical impasses which are discussed in this study.

Theoretical problems

A major difficulty of rationalist philosophy is the notion of the disembodied self, intended as a subjective, inner observer separate from the physiological constitution of the body, ensuing from the identification of consciousness with a Cartesian ego (or transcendental ego, in idealist currents). This results in a dualistic epistemic scheme of knower-known vulnerable to skeptical objections. Empiricist conceptions, on the other hand, downplay the importance of consciousness, and do not address the phenomenological character of experiences (the notion of "what it feels like" to experience, or to be endowed with sentience). Materialist theories of mind affirm the independence and objectivity of the empirical world, sometimes to the extent of denying consciousness, because its reality would seem to imply the existence of a substantial ego. These conceptual problems, and the ensuing contrapositions in Western philosophy and science, it is maintained, derive from the assimilation of consciousness with subjectivity through investment in the psychological notion of self. An increased awareness of this problem can be perceived in disciplines such as psychology and neurology, which, beginning from the 1980's have started to endorse a "postcognitive" understanding of self as a process rather than as an "inherently existing entity" (*cf. e.g.* Metzinger 2009, Baggini 2011 and Damasio 2012). In spite of these recent developments, perduring notions of "disembodiedness", outcome of the subject-object duality, or alternatively physicalist theories which negate consciousness, still permeate the debate in epistemology and dominate folk-psychological representations.

Purpose and scope of the work

The acknowledgement of these theoretical issues in the Western understanding of consciousness, prompted me to formulate the following research question: is it possible to devise a theoretical framework of consciousness which retains its fundamental character in phenomenal cognition, without incurring in the problem of reification and subject-object duality?

In order to address this issue, a comparative analysis with Eastern traditions, specifically Hindu Advaita Vedanta and Madhyamaka Buddhism was carried out. The choice of these schools is motivated by their engagement in the philosophical study of consciousness, accomplishing syntheses which are considered, in their cultural contexts, complete expositions on the subject. The cross-cultural analysis of Advaita Vedanta and Madhyamaka Buddhism is based on David Loy's work "Nonduality: a study in comparative philosophy" (1988). The thesis advanced by the author is that these traditions share a "core theory" represented by the notion of nonduality, which represents a "final" standpoint about the nature of consciousness, knowledge and reality. This concept refers to the ultimately illusory nature of the ontological divide between opposites, and is applied to the notion of selfhood and associated with soteriological experiences of

liberation (*nirvana, bodhi*). The negation of self is considered of major importance in the economy of the doctrine of awakening (cessation from suffering and rebirth) and implies the shifting of ontological reality from the human mind to an absolute principle defined as *Brahman* in Hindu philosophy, or void or nothingness in Mahayana Buddhism. The choice of Loy's work, among other comparative studies, is based on its thoroughness and systematicity of philosophical exposition of the concept of nonduality, which is addressed from different angles (*i.e.* perception, action and thinking).

The relevance of this perspective in philosophy of mind, I propose, is represented by the possibility of resolving conceptual oppositions such as the mind-body, consciousness-matter and subjectivity-objectivity through an understanding of consciousness as nondual. This implies the necessity of reformulating phenomenological theories, through a revision of the notion of subjectivity. The concept of self in Western phenomenology is reiterated by the notion of a "witnessing consciousness", and of a "transcendental ego" in idealistic currents, which maintain a subtle duality between subject and object. The Indian traditions, through the negation of self affirm, instead, the non-intentional structure of consciousness, that is, its lack of subject-object duality; the latter is considered a language-based, thought-constructed superimposition upon a phenomenologically neutral experience. This ultimate reality is intended as a pre-reflective substratum which reveals itself as a phenomenological experience of "wholeness" in Advaita, or "emptiness" in Buddhism.

The claim of nonduality is not an Eastern prerogative, and this study shows parallels with the Western metaphysical notion of being, as endorsed by philosophers such as Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plotinus, Spinoza and Shelling, among others.

The recent reopening of the questioning of consciousness, in analytic philosophy, is nowadays stimulating a cross-disciplinary dissemination between fields, which integrates the experimental/scientific and phenomenological/cognitive perspectives. This study, I believe, may contribute to the growing interdisciplinary debate by showing the convergence of religious-philosophic ideas, through the exposition of the philosophical notion of consciousness and nonduality, with scientific fields of inquiry traditionally held separate, such as anthropology, sociology, psychology and neurology. These outcomes may, however, only be hinted at within the scope of this work. Its main focus will be, therefore, circumscribed to comparing and discussing modern models of consciousness, self and subjectivity, with the purpose to show how epistemological problems in Western philosophy can be overcome through a nondual theory.

Note on translating conventions: in order to facilitate the lecture, I have decided to rendered Sanskrit and Pali terms without diacritic marks and accents and to render them with the closest English pronunciation.

2. BEING AND BECOMING IN ANCIENT GREEK THOUGHT

The origin of western philosophic thought can be traced back to the 6th century BCE, when rational forms of inquiry about the world developed in competition with mythological, religious narratives, which had constituted up to then the predominant means of conveying cosmological and metaphysical notions.

Philosophy was intended, in Hellenistic times, as an inquiry into the nature of reality which started from the study of being, or existence in se. This was the domain of metaphysics, which was the basic branch of philosophy from which all others (*e.g.*, ontology, epistemology, ethics) derived. Common topics addressed were those of substance, time, change, the nature of sensory things and their properties, cause and effect, *etc*. The study of physical reality was known as natural philosophy and was seen as a subset of questions focusing on the tangible aspect of existence, dependent on metaphysical principles encompassing what is "beyond" (*metá*) the material (*physis*).

The pre-Socratic philosophers' interests revolved around the issues of the nature of being, the fundamental substance of existence, and the problems posed by time and change in the world. One of the earliest, major philosophical debates recorded was between Heraclitus and Parmenides who formulated two opposed monist systems based on the contrasting aspects of Being and Becoming.

Heraclitus' philosophy of becoming acknowledged the *kosmos* (world order) as a never ending process of change through the interplay of opposite forces, continuously transforming into each other in a system of balanced exchanges (Graham in IEP, 2005). The process was described as an eternal fire which symbolized endless permutation, and sometimes also as a river, which owned its permanence to the flux of water. Heraclitus posited the *logos* as a unity underlying change, in which flux and interplay of opposite dualities were the necessary conditions for its manifest existence. Fire, although generating other elements, did not represent a substance which ultimate reality consisted of, as in the pre-Socratics' doctrines of origination from a single element, but was conceived as a deeper unity embodying the manifestation of opposites (Graham in Mautner 2005, 271-272).

Parmenides, who wrote presumably shortly after Heraclitus, rejected the notion of a plurality of opposed substances, which he considered outcome of a naturalistic cosmology, and endeavored to defend the ontological unity of the cosmos through the logic of non-contradiction. In his poem *On nature* he describes being (the *logos*), as: immobile, not subject to becoming; one, as multiplicity would imply non-being; eternal, not starting and ending at some point; unborn/uncaused; and indivisible, as separation would cause gaps of non-being within itself. Furthermore he drew a distinction between subjective opinion (*doxa*), from truth *(alatheia)*. The first represented what could perhaps be called a commonsense view of the world (intended

throughout the text as naïve realism), in which sensory appearances are deemed real, while the latter was a form of idealism which considered phenomena deceptive appearances. Phenomena were not empirically negated by Parmenides, but considered "instances of becoming". These were not to be reified into ontological realities (separate instances or beings), as that would lead to admit the existence of non-being and to infringe the logic of non-contradiction.

Parmenides has been known to write his treatise in response to Heraclitus. The contraposition between philosophers, however, has been historically overemphasized and much of the tension between their doctrines may be ascribed to mischaracterization by contemporary commentators. Heraclitus' philosophy was, in fact, taken to imply a dualistic conflict of opposites, while Parmenides' as an absolute monism which denied the existence of the world (*ibid.*, 453).

In any case the two philosophies raised a heated discussion which had repercussions in the later philosophic and religious developments in the Greek-Roman world. Parmenides' position became eventually prevalent, but gave rise to an effort to mediate between the rigorous intellectual rationality of the immutable being and the "irrational", sensible world of changing forms.

This concern would become of major importance for Plato, who developed his theory of ideas to account for the manifestation of the material world (thus admittedly committing "parricide" against Parmenides). Plato maintained that the emanation from the pure world of ideas (forms) toward the sensible world of becoming and of matter produced the existence of particulars, which were not things in themselves but only reflexes of the eidetic world. He also introduced a difference between being and existence (etym.: to stand outside) and conceived mankind as cosmologically located between the poles of being and non-being. Evil, which was a characteristic of materiality, was conceived as a progressive distancing from the Good into the realm of matter; this was however, not an entity existing in itself, but possessed only an indirect existence as a form of non-being, just as the essence of shadow is lack of light. This concept was later integrated in Augustinian theology with consequences both in the moral sphere and in the epistemological relation between the soul and body.

A further brake with Parmenides' monism was introduced by Aristotle who, in turn, refuted the Platonic idealist theory of a transcendental world of forms and tried to account for the problem of becoming by introducing the concepts of potentiality and actuality. He acknowledged that the problem of change was of major importance because it affected the essence of things. Change is the process through which one thing loses some characteristics (accidents) and gains new ones, but the logical constraints posed by Parmenides' metaphysics denied its possibility. Aristotle maintained that existence presented itself in the form of a singular substance, which possessed two complementary aspects: form and matter (*hylomorphism*). Potentiality was an attribute of matter, while actuality pertained to form (the only pure form being God). Change was admitted

as an actualization of the essence of a thing, which represented the movement from a state of potentiality to one of actuality, although always an imperfect one, as full actuality would imply the cessation of movement. The universe represented, in this view, a perpetual state of flux of substance toward its teleological goal of pure essence, that is, God, which gave it dynamism as Prime Mover and final cause (*ibid.*: 43-47).

Aristotelian philosophy came, in spite of the metaphysical underlying structure, to be associated with realism, which presupposes an analysis of reality starting from empirical entities (particulars), and represents a first step toward an inquiry of "things in themselves". This view can be contrasted to Platonism which, through the postulation of universals and negation of the sensible world (not existent per se and unknowable), was idealistic. Platonism exerted throughout Antiquity an enormous influence on mystical currents such as Gnosticism and Neoplatonism, and came to be adopted in Patristic Christianity as the philosophical cornerstone of the doctrine of incarnation. In Scholastic theology, however, Aristotelianism became the orthodox position of the Church, through the reintroduction of the philosopher's works in the West via Arabic sources, and the doctrinal redesign of Thomas Aquinas. Aristotelian philosophy can be seen as a precursor of modern epistemology, due to its negation of universals, which became intended only as modes of interpretation of the mind, and emphasis on particulars (nominalism). This approach to philosophy, opposed to Parmenides' and Heraclitus' metaphysical monism, is at the basis of the Western notion of scientific inquiry modernly intended.

3. PHILOSOPHY OF HUMANISM

The crisis of Scholastic theology at the end of the XIV century marks the beginning of Humanism, which can be broadly intended as a group of philosophies which emphasized the human perspective in terms of independent agency and thinking, and operated a shift in epistemology from a *logocentric* to an *anthropocentric* one. Human reason had been held, in the Scholastic synthesis, in high regard as capable of enquiring into the mysteries of faith by logic (by the assimilation of truth and intelligibility with God or *logos*), through to the mediation of the revelation.

In the post-Scholastic Renaissance and pre-modern period, however, new trends in philosophical inquiry including empirical and rational attitudes departed from the traditional problem of knowledge of the universals, and started to focus on the world and the human soul through the epistemic alleys of senses and mind.

A central figure in the crystallization of these tendencies was Descartes, who, in an attempt to build a foundational epistemology of the subject immune to skeptical doubts, tried to construct a

system based on his own soul as the first ontological reality. In his analysis of the *cogito* he famously maintained that however all things (perceptions and thoughts) were liable to doubt, he could not deny his own existence as the one doubting (III meditation). Through producing an ontological argument for the existence of a (non-deceiving) God, he was able to accept the possibility of "clear and distinct ideas" as the basis or "solid ground" on which he was able to posit the existence of the external world, bodies and minds outside his own. This definition of knowledge was a reiteration of the Platonic formula *justified, true belief*, which implied some form of dualistic representation in the mind of the external world. This conception, however, overturned the Parmenidean notion of the subject as an immutable essence hidden within sensible things and representing their ontological foundation (substance), into that of an individual subjectivity, mind or self-consciousness. This theory constituted a prototype of a "metaphysics of the subject" in which the self became the first substance to which the existence of all the others was subordinate. Empiricist philosophers such as Locke and Hume criticized the reification of the self into a "substance" and the solipsism that it implied, but could not account for knowledge of the world without a theoretical split between the subjective and objective spheres of experience. The Cartesian conception left moreover still open the possibility of skeptical doubt, and led Hume to the rejection of the notion of rational knowledge and to the adoption of criteria such as habit or custom to explain any apparent cause-effect correspondence of the mind with the outside world.

A major watershed is western thinking is traditionally recognized in Kant, who endeavored to reconcile the empiricist and rationalist approaches by developing the notion of self as a pure, transcendental form or container of all the other representations. The dualism between mind and world was, on the other hand, reshaped into the dualism between the thing in itself (the unintelligible noumenon) and the subjective, phenomenological representation of it.

Kant maintained synthetic a priori knowledge (epistemic conditions which must be present before any actual experience can take place) to be necessary for any cognitive act, affirming that the noumenal world is not knowable per se, but necessitates the human psychosomatic apparatus to be perceived. Such knowledge pertained therefore not the noumenon, but our own constitution and the structure of our interpretation (Kuehn in Mautner, 2005: 321-325). One instance of Kant's application of synthetic a priori knowledge was space and time, which he called "pure forms of intuition". These could not be derived from the experience of objects, because cognition of things presupposed already the representation of space and time as a primary epistemic modality. Space and time subsisted, therefore, before all experience, being the intuitions by which men connect the phenomenal data, and are therefore "functions", *i.e.* modes of mind. The explanation given by Kant for their transcendental nature resided in that, while gaining the sense and meaning only if referred to the experience, however, they did not belong to it and did not

draw their reality from the experience. This argument, derived mostly by geometrical representation allowed Kant to support a weak form of "transcendental idealism," which maintained that space and time represented properties of things as they appear to us, but not properties or relations of things as they are in themselves.

By positing the nature of experience "inside man" Kant's theory offered an alternative to Hume's skepticism. The transcendental synthesis between rationalism and empiricism which Kant aspired at led, however, to a sort of phenomenological mire because it maintained that the knowledge of the world was not possible, but only that of our structure of experience, that is, a complex representational web of space, time, self, body and causation.

Kant's work had great influence in Germany and abroad, and gave renewed impulse to philosophic speculation on the relationship between nature and the human modes of knowledge.

Two major philosophical traditions arose to rework and defy the contradictions in Kant's theory. In Germany, successive philosophical projects by Fichte, Shelling and Hegel focused on challenging the concept of thing in itself as unknowable noumenon. In Austria and England challenges were directed to the metaphysical structure implied in the notion of synthetic a priori, which Kant held as basis also of mathematics and natural science, in an effort to clean epistemology from metaphysics.

4. CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

The distinction between analytic and continental philosophy arose explicitly in response to Kantian epistemology, but can be otherwise seen as a manifestation of long-dating tendencies to conceive the quest for ultimate knowledge as starting from the empirical world (Aristotle) or from an intellectual, idealistic principle (Plato). Analytic philosophy endorses a modern, scientific outlook and maintains a correspondence theory of truth, that is, beliefs and propositions are true when compared to an "immediately accessible world" (Prado 2003, 185).

The continental tradition holds instead the relation between mind and phenomena as much more problematic, and focuses on consciousness as having ontological primacy over the phenomenal world, which independence from the cognitive act is considered far from entirely obvious. Two of the most characteristic movements in the continental tradition will be presented in the coming chapters. Postmodern movements such as deconstruction and post-structuralism do not address directly the issue of consciousness and eschew the analysis of the notion of subjectivity, which they find problematic because it suggests the existence of a substantial ego. For this reason and in order to pose a limit to the scope of this study, these movements will not be presented in the essay.

4.1 German Idealism

The age of German idealism is collocated in the decades 1780's to 1840's and represents a philosophic movement strictly related to other cultural and artistic currents such as Romanticism and Classicism taking place contemporaneously in Germany. The movement arose in the background of the debate which came to be known as the "pantheism controversy", between the Jewish philosopher F.H. Jacobi and dramatist G. Lessing which focused on the latter's endorsement of Spinozism, and to which many important philosophers of the time such as Mendelssohn participated.

The coming to the fore of Spinoza's philosophy in the late eighteenth-century Germany was due to its contributions to the late-Enlightenment debates between religion and science, as being able to provide a possible alternative to materialism, atheism and deism. Spinoza's philosophy asserted a monistic metaphysics in which spirit and nature were identified. God was no longer the transcendent creator of the universe who ruled it via providence, but Nature itself, understood as an infinite, necessary and fully deterministic system of which humans are part (Dutton, in IEP 2005).

Idealism arose in Germany also as a response to the difference between appearances and "things in themselves" which the Kantian exposition brought about, as a project aimed at negating the thing in itself and tracing back the existence of both the object, (Nature) and the subject, (consciousness) to a transcendental unity. The movement was inspired by the philosophy of the Austrian Karl Reinhold, who maintained that philosophy could be derived from a single foundational principle. This, he maintained was "the principle of consciousness", which was fundamental to all cognition (MCQuillan, in IEP 2012). On the basis of Spinoza's theory of identity and following the wake of neoclassicist revival, the idealists attempted to reformulate a Neoplatonic metaphysics of unity between subject and object. This was attainable through an act of will (Fichte), an intuition beyond reason (Schelling) or through sheer logic (Hegel).

According to Fichte, the major philosophic dilemma was whether to attribute primacy in the creation of subjective experience to Nature, intended as the objects of consciousness (dogmatism), or to the I or spirit, thereby asserting the independence of consciousness in the face of phenomena (idealism). Fichte opted for the latter, which he considered more rewarding especially in moral terms, for its stressing independence and freedom of the self, compared to the deterministic dogmatism. He thereby started the pursuit of reducing Nature to consciousness, which he intended as a "moral ego", motivated by the "law of the ought". This position was, however, criticized for being subjectivistic, and led Schelling to formulate a more naturalistic account of consciousness.

The problem, for Schelling, was to give Nature a more tangible consistence toward the conscious reflection of the self, without, on the other hand, reifying it as something external to

consciousness. This, he accomplished through transforming the concept of Nature from the Fichtian *not-I* to a universal principle which gave rise to both self and not-self, in a temporal development in which Nature (not-I) was that which was not yet I. The ego, in other words, could never become the absolute principle of consciousness but could only subsist in the interdependent relation with the objects, *i.e.* the external world. In this way, Schelling came to conceive Nature in a Spinozian, pantheistic way, as an undifferentiated unity of subject-object, matter and consciousness, which only after the appearance of self-consciousness would come to differ from each other (Lamanna 1955, 31). For Schelling, this transcendental principle of immediate being, like the Neoplatonic One, could not be beholden but through an intellectual intuition; this was the act that made philosophical idealism possible, and without which the doctrine would result incomprehensible.

The conception of intellectual intuition received harsh criticism by Hegel, which condemned it as mystical and irrational, since for him it was only a primitive and archaic form of knowledge which had to be overcome by logic. Hegel, therefore, overturned Schelling's perspective affirming the superiority of the rational activity over intuition, through the construction of a "dialectic reason". This was fully developed into a system which claimed to arrive at being through the mediation of the rational mind. Existence became, in his system, identified with the sole possibility of being thought intellectually, so that the world itself could be derived from thinking. This view implied arguably, a rather inflated and anthropocentric view of the self, in which Nature was such only in relation to man, intended as his thought "I am". The Hegelian exposition, through its contributions to logic and its systematicity, came in the end to be the most influential and shaped a representative view of the otherwise multifaceted German idealism.

The merits of this movement were that it presented an alternative to both rationalism and empiricism and eliminated the conception of "things in themselves", (which was considered an oxymoron), by positing the necessity that these appeared always to a consciousness. The objections moved to this philosophy were, however, the risks of solipsism that it implied through an obscure logic distanced from the commonsense view of reality, and the difficulties of conciliating the transcendental subject (which was liable to degenerate into a "Cartesian" subject) with the otherness of Nature intended as a mere object of cognition.

In the mid 1800's the rise of empirical methods in the natural sciences and historical-critical methods in the humanities, together with the felt necessity of leaving behind speculative excesses, led to the decline of German idealism. In its place, a more epistemologically sober Neo-Kantianism was established in Germany as the dominant philosophical school at the end of the nineteenth century (McQuillan in IEP, 2012).

4.2 Phenomenology

In the wake of idealism, another movement emerged in Germany in the early 20th century through the work of Edmund Husserl, Logical Investigations. Phenomenology may be intended as the study of structures of experience, or consciousness, where phenomena represent the appearances of things, or things as they appear in our subjective experience (Woodruff, 2013). Phenomenology borrowed from idealism much of the terminology and theoretical standpoint and based its interpretation on the Scholastic notion of intentionality. Another borrowing from ancient traditions was the Neoplatonic distinction between phenomena and noumenon (consciousness).

The focus of the inquiry is phenomena, which are considered regardless of their ontological status (independently existing or idealistic), but only in as much as they represent experiences from the subjective or first-person point of view. This approach, which characterizes phenomenology more as a discipline of subjective inquiry rather than a philosophical project in itself, reflects the maieutic purpose that the methodology adopts. The main features of phenomenologic inquiry are the *epoché* and the *reduction*. The first designates a parenthesizing of ordinary knowledge and beliefs about the world and represents a starting point of a radical reflection of consciousness, considered necessary to free the mind of judgments, presuppositions, *etc.*, which are normally (unconsciously) superimposed on experience (Sander, 2013: 5). *Epoché* was a term originally in use by the skeptics which designated an attitude of suspension of belief, about *e.g.* the external world, leading to *ataraxia*, a state of unperturbed calm.

The second term designates the reframing of all empirical experiences into "pure phenomena". This conception may be interpreted psychologically as an aspiration to seeing the world with equanimity, through an apodictic knowledge which allows one to distinguish "the given" from opinions, and which underlies the "therapeutic" purposes kindled in phenomenology (possibly heritage of Husserl's teacher Brentano and his background in psychoanalysis).

Husserl's methodology was later elaborated by many psychologists and philosophers who developed alternative interpretations around the meaning and import of the phenomenological reduction. The importance of Husserl's work can hardly be overestimated for its influences in the 20th century on *e.g.* Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. Sartre for example derived his ontology from the phenomenological analysis of experience as constituted by the complementary aspects of the *for-itself* (consciousness) and *in-itself* (intentional object). The definition of consciousness as "empty" or transparent to itself reflects the Kantian conception of self as a transcendental subject, foundational to continental philosophy.

This idea would be later criticized by Rorty in his "Philosophy and the mirror of nature", by Heidegger's critique of being as presence and by Derrida's analysis of *differance*. In the second half of the last century, the arising within the analytic tradition of the discipline of Philosophy of

Mind brought about a renewed interest in phenomenology and a convergence of research interests in the analysis of consciousness and subjective experience as integrating the analysis of objective reality.

5. ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

Analytic philosophy started in England in the early twentieth-century, through the works of George Moore and Bertrand Russell. The dominant philosophic stance prevalent at the time in the academia was British idealism, which was a radical form of metaphysical monism and anti-realism. Reality was conceived as a single indivisible whole whose nature was mental or ideal. Objects of experience were considered not existing *simpliciter* (in se), but only in virtue of the "internal relations" they possessed with all the other objects, thus forming an interrelated whole (of meaning and/or substance), (Preston, in IEP 2006).

Moore refuted this conception and endeavored to defend "common sense" and the existence of an external world through the formulation of a critical-realist theory of knowledge. Critical or indirect theories differ from direct (naïve) realism, which affirms the existence of mind-independent objects, and postulate instead the existence of "intermediaries" between subject and object (*i.e.* the sense-data theory). A second innovation proposed by Moore was a new philosophical method which consisted in focusing on narrowly defined problems held in isolation, instead of system-building or grand philosophical syntheses typical of the continental tradition (*ibid.*).

The attention to the structure of language and its relationship with the world gave analytic philosophy its peculiar linguistic imprint. Moore, and later Russell, articulated a linguistic theory of meaning based on a sense-reference structure. These terms represented the relationship between language and world, where the first constituted a mode of presentation or designation, while the latter indicated the designated object "in the world", be it a person, a concept or a function. Reference to a "real" object (although reality was granted in Russell's theory also to imaginary objects) was, according to this analysis, the criterion of meaningfulness of an expression, which determined its logical "truth-value".

The problems inherent the linguistic theory of proposition-meaning was the nature of these linguistic items, which was left intentionally ambiguous by Moore. If these possessed a mental nature, the theory would imply an indirect realism subject to skeptical objections and liable to reshape the theory into idealism. Moore's move was, then, to make signifiers directly coincident with the objects designated (so as to make for example the world "table" identical with the actual object). The same reduction was also attempted in the sense-data theory for *qualia*, which were postulated as identical with the objects perceived. This sense-data version of direct realism

revealed itself untenable as subject to two major objections: the argument of illusion (lack of corresponding object in hallucinatory experiences) and the argument from synthetic incompatibility (the same object's surface produces different sense-data for observers disposed at different angles, thus implying a contradiction in the assimilation of sense-data and object). Moore eventually failed to produce convincing argument in support of a realist theory about the existence of the external world (as something independent from experience) and of the validity of commonsense propositions about it.

Russell later abandoned his propositional realism and together with Ludwig Wittgenstein developed the theory of "logical atomism" or ideal-language analysis, which characterizes a second phase of analytic philosophy. The logical consequences and purpose of this theory, as it emerges from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, were to demonstrate the meaninglessness of philosophical problems, by showing that they were "conundrums generated by a failure to understand the limits of meaningful discourse" (*ibid.*). From Wittgenstein's Tractatus derived the conception of philosophy, in the analytic tradition, as a critique of language as source of metaphysical (*i.e.* abstract/irrational) speculation, and the idea that scientific facts about the natural world were the only valid objects of rational discourse.

The emphasis on logic and natural science resulted in a subsequent evolution in the analytic tradition, which, beginning from the 1920's, advanced a view of philosophical knowledge as completely identified with scientific knowledge.

5.1 Logical Positivism

The Vienna Circle was formed by a group of philosophers who sought to reconceptualize empiricism and to bring it to alignment with modern science. The group was also ideologically committed to eliminate superstition, religion and metaphysics as pre-scientific forms of thought (Mautner, 2005: 481-482).

Their methodological stance was based on empirical evidence as the only acceptable form of knowledge, together with logical and mathematical statements which provided the rationalist basis accounting for the meaning of propositions. They denied however any synthetic a priori principle of knowledge. At the heart of Logical Positivism was the *verification theory of meaning*, which claimed that non-tautological statements have meaning only if they can be empirically verified. On the wake of Wittgenstein's work, logical positivism embraced a view of philosophy as a tool to establish and enforce the limits of meaningful language through linguistic analysis. On this basis, non empirical-grounded views were dismissed by declaring them not merely wrong or false, but meaningless (Preston, in IEP 2006). Logical positivism advanced therefore a conception of philosophy (of science) as meta-theory, a "second-order" reflection of "first-order" sciences (Uebel, in SEP 2012).

One of the major causes of dismissal of Logical Positivism was due to a paradoxical flaw in its core tenet of verification, which held that non-tautological propositions had meaning only if they could be empirically verified. The verification principle, critics maintained, belonged to the same class of synthetic propositions (which necessitate empirical verification), and therefore rendered itself metaphysical and, by the same token, meaningless.

Other weaknesses inherent the verification principle were that it undermined also the inductive theories which are commonly used to carry out scientific work (constituting the "gap between observation and theory"), without at the same time being able to eliminate non-scientific statements which it had endeavored to abrogate.

The confutation of much of the postulates of Logical Positivism was subsequently carried out by Quine who, among other things, rejected the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions. The analysis of ideal language as a philosophic project evolved in the 1950's, giving way to an analysis of "ordinary language" which rejected categorical distinctions of propositions such as empirical *vs.* logical and stressed the role of philosophy as a tool for the simplification of speculative problems based on common and metaphysical language.

5.2 Philosophy of Mind

Philosophy of Mind is a discipline emerged in the latter half of the 20th century reflecting a revolution in the outlook of the discipline of psychology and in contrast to the conception of mind as a sphere of private access separate from the body (body-mind dualism).

The development of psychology in the 19th century represented in fact a reiteration and accentuation of the "subjective turn" which had begun with rationalism and idealism, and which reached perhaps its climax in the discipline of phenomenology. Freudian psychology at its dawn, postulated the existence of a subconscious realm of thought governed by own laws which were not subject to rational control, in which the importance of the ego in cognitive processes was drastically diminished. Developments in the discipline, especially in the Anglo-American world, such as the "psychology of the ego", however, did not take heed of Freud's intuition that "the ego is not master in his own house" (Kapic in Kapic & McCormack, 2012) and supported the theory that the self possessed some free, functional processes independent from the *id* and super-ego. In response to such conceptions, which are nowadays addressed as "folk psychology", the newly emerging discipline tried to formulate a more naturalistic account of psychological processes in terms of "publicly observable relations between stimuli and responses" (Jackson & Ray, 1998).

The first philosophical theory of mind, elaborated by Watson and Skinner under the name of Behaviorism appeared contemporaneously with the Logical Positivist project and was popular in the decades 1920's to 1950's. This theory can be summarized, in its strong variety, as eschewing

descriptive frameworks in terms of mental states, to replace them with behaviors as the only empirical, scientifically analyzable data.

Psychological Behaviorism's historical roots can be traced in the empiricist traditions of John Locke and David Hume and their theory of associationism. This theory states that mental processes operate by the association of one mental state with its successor states, relying on "introspectible entities", such as perceptual experiences or stimulations as the first links in associations, and thoughts or ideas as the second links (Graham, in SEP 2010). Psychological behaviorism maintained that the descriptive framework in terms of "internal states", such as thoughts and intentional propositions, should be eliminated in favor of reference to behavioral responses without making appeal to "mental events". For behaviorists, in fact, discourses centered on *subjective states of mind* were not founded on a metaphysical subjectivity or a dualistic, non-physical presence of those states, and were to be reframed as a physicalist (monist) system. The theory of behaviorism in its strong formulation represents, therefore, a stance diametrically opposed to the continental-phenomenologic tradition of introspection based on an inner observer.

In spite of representing arguably the accomplishment of the analytic philosophy's tendency to empiricism and objectivity, Behaviorism came in disfavor through objections moved on two fronts. The first regarded the felt necessity of postulating some degree of representationalism (and thus mentalism) for the organism, in its perception of the environment, mediating between stimuli and behavior. The second was that (subjective) experience possesses characteristic qualities or feelings which allow us to think in terms of "what it is like" to be a certain organism and to distinguish between inanimate and sentient beings. The failure of Behaviorism to account satisfactorily for *qualia*, or conscious experiences and to distinguish them from mere behavior, such as in the case of pain, was a decisive argument for the abandonment of the research project.

In the 1950's and 60's new theories of mind emerged to overcome the limitation of Behaviorism, such as the reductionistic Mind-Brain Identity Theory and Functionalism. The Mind-Brain Identity Theory stated some kind of correspondence between biochemical processes in the brain and mental events, either in terms of strict identity (type-type variant) or without fixed neurological correspondences (type-token) and expressing only a functional identity between brain states and mind. The second version led to what is now called Functionalism, which, in its strong variant, assimilates all mental states to the computational functioning of a machine. The problem of addressing the character of mental states without introducing a substance dualism was approached in the theory through identifying thinking with representational structures generated by computational algorithms (Thagard, in SEP 2012). The advantage of Functionalism over Behaviorism was that it allowed the explanation of mental states such as beliefs and desires in terms of causal relations between external and internal system variables (Searle, 1998).

Identity theories of all kinds received, however, a major, destabilizing criticism from Thomas Nagel in his famous article *What is it like to be a bat?* (1974). In his work, Nagel pointed out that the conscious quality of experience is incompatible with physicalistic explanations. According to the author, the ideal of Western science and Philosophy of Mind of moving toward a greater objectivity in their descriptive frameworks is incorrect, because they try to reduce the subjective point of view to an objective one, in an attempt to describe the "reality" shared by different individuals. This reduction would imply, according to the author, a "departure" from reality (as it is phenomenologically experienced), toward a rather more conceptual view of it. Nagel's appeal to the phenomenological character of experience, in which consciousness is involved in every perceptual act as the "subject" of experience (*ibid.*: 437), can be seen as crystallizing a major turning point in Philosophy of Mind, characterized by the return of the phenomenological point of view in epistemological theories of cognition.

5.3 Modern theories of perception

Theories presently discussed in epistemology try in different ways, to reconcile realism (the existence of a mind-independent world) with the phenomenological perspective, intended as the intentional structure of (subjective) consciousness. These theories address therefore the experience of "what it is like" to perceive, or the capacity of experiencing phenomenologically. The Sense-data theory, precedently mentioned, is a form of indirect realism, and accounts for experience by postulating both an *act* of awareness (or apprehension) and an *object* apprehended in the form of a sense-datum (Bonjour, SEP, 2013). The latter are mental intermediaries (similar to *qualia*) which are used to explain the relation between mind and perceptual objects in the external world. The necessity of sense data is due to an argument which states that the same objects produce a vast range of phenomenal experiences under different conditions (*e.g.* light, observation angle, *etc*.), so that it is easier to account for perception of a sense-datum, rather than of an immediately accessible "real" object, which constantly *is* the way it appears. This results in a Kantian duality between the noumenon and phenomenon and constitutes a "metaphysical" aspect of this theory. Sense-data are, moreover, "quite nebulous entities," of a mental nature, but not reducible to brain phenomena, which, by interposing themselves between perceiver and objects perceived, are susceptible to give rise to skeptical objections of the Cartesian kind (Audi 2011, 45).

Another theory, the adverbial, maintains a "direct access" to experience by negating the necessity of sense data (*e.g.* "I experience a red patch"), and claiming a modification of the experience on behalf of the subject ("I am appeared redly," *ibid.*, 47). This is done in order to avoid the commitment to the existence of mental intermediaries which would otherwise imply a form of representationalism. The adverbial theory avoids, thus, the discussion about intermediaries, and

endeavors to overcome the dualism of noumenon and phenomenon by negating the distinction between external sensible objects and internal perceptions. All forms of cognition are thus (mental) states which are "adverbially" or subjectively modified. In this way the theory avoids skeptical objections, which challenge the reality and correspondence of mental representations with objects in the external world, at the price, however, of becoming rather indistinct from idealism.

Another approach, although far less popular, resorts to sheer phenomenalism, and strips away objects of their substance and analyzes perception only in terms of sense-data (*ibid.*, 54). This view holds that physical objects cannot justifiably be said to exist in themselves (non-essentialism), but only as a bundle of perceptual phenomena or sensory stimuli.

Through the reintroduction of the phenomenal perspective of consciousness and subjectivity in studies of mind and perception, modern epistemology seems to have thus veered again toward themes dear to the continental tradition. Realist theories maintain, however, at their basis, a fundamental noumenon-phenomenon and/or a subject-object representational problem, which is the outcome of the duality mind-phenomena (or mind-objects, in case of naïve realism). The attempt to formulate linguistic explanations about the nature of the subject-object relation, such as in the case of the adverbial theory, suggests that much of the epistemological difficulties in reconciling phenomenology with realism are possibly of a verbal nature.

It is timely, at this point, to summarize the specific arguments that Western continental and analytic philosophy have made thus far, in their analysis of the relationship between subject and object and mind and world, before turning to the analysis of the Indian philosophic systems and their solutions to these problems.

6. CONTINENTAL AND ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY CONFRONTED

The Kantian idealist system brought the debate on the nature of reality and of man as its beholder to a phenomenological view of the human psychophysical apparatus as a transcendental container of phenomenal representations. Although realism was theoretically admitted, in practice phenomena in se were unknowable (*noumenon*) and always dependent on the *a priori* forms of human consciousness. This compromise between realism and idealism was successively criticized through a commitment mostly to idealism, in the continental tradition, or realism in the analytical.

The continental tradition as carried out by the German idealists accentuated the subjective aspect of experience, and proposed a monistic account of human subjectivity as a transcendental ego, which replaced the concept of "God" in modern philosophy. This notion was dissimilar to the Cartesian *res cogitans* and was conceived not as an inner observer of an external world, but

rather as an "ultimate subjectivity", embedded in Nature and manifesting in and as the historical emergence of self-consciousness from it. This form of objective idealism considered therefore Nature as a pantheistic, self-conscious, undifferentiated unity from which subject and object arose. Further developments in the continental tradition including phenomenology and existentialism took subjective consciousness as the starting point in the formulation of epistemological theories. A major criticism addressed to continental philosophers was the perceived inability to account for the phenomenal world and the validity of commonsense knowledge without turning consciousness into a solipsistic Cartesian subject, and also for the sympathies of idealism for mysticism. The intentional character of consciousness, although "empty" or transparent to itself was criticized by analytic philosophers as liable of perpetuating the phenomenological fallacy of understanding oneself as a "glassy essence" (*sec.* Rorty) separate from the body and nature.

In its early developments, the analytic tradition took instead realism (even naïve) and commonsense knowledge as both rational and epistemically justified, holding that the world is real, independent and accessible to consciousness. The commitment of many philosophers to physicalist monism left, however, unchallenged the theoretical problems posed by the enduring duality between hypostatized subject and object, and led to elaborated theses on how to bridge this gap. Positivist philosophy and Behaviorism tried to eliminate the subjective element and reduce experience to the empirical datum, the subjective mind being considered essentially a network of representational propositions about the world. In the latter half of the 20th century, instead, various theories within Philosophy of Mind such as Functionalism and Artificial Intelligence reintroduced consciousness, or subjectivity, but endeavored to explain it in terms of computational algorithms and largely regarded it as an epiphenomenon of brain matter. These views considered consciousness as merely the tip of an iceberg which consisted of unconscious computational brain processes.

The recent turn to phenomenological analysis in epistemology, in analytic departments, and its emergence in neurologic cognitive theories, has restated the importance of consciousness and subjectivity in the phenomenological experience. The analysis of the relation between the conscious mind and the objective world of experience is carried out mostly via indirect realist models which hold the reality of both subjective consciousness and mind-independent objects. This conception has led to the formulation of dubious epistemological theories, like the sense-data, which rather than supporting the inherent existence of objects, arguably complicate the phenomenological description through metaphysical, theoretical entities like *qualia*. The importance of the phenomenological perspective in experiencing, seems, however, to have been definitively restated in Philosophy of Mind. This is due to the recognition that in spite of the efforts to eliminate it from the scientific debate, or to reduce it to an objective, empirical

phenomenon, the conscious quality of experiencing must be considered an essential feature without which cognition would not be actually meaningful. The persisting difficulty in Western philosophy at present is to characterize what consciousness actually is, whether it can be equated with the notion of subjectivity or self, and what are its relations to the objective world.

The self in continental philosophy is depicted as an empty container of phenomenological possibilities separate (transcendent) from the world, while in early analytic philosophy and in folk psychology as an embodied subject at the origin of an individual consciousness. This is considered affected by, but distinct from the physiologic processes of the body, while independent, but at the same time influenced if not completely determined by its environment and society. The equation of consciousness with an inner mind or self is therefore liable to reproduce the same difficulties inherent the subject-object duality, which seems to imply always a form of representationalism of the external world to a subject, whether this is intended as a "transcendental" or a more prosaic "empirical" ego. Although modern interdisciplinary studies in cognitive science and psychology have started to eschew the view of self as an entity (*sec. e.g.* Blackmore, Chalmers, Churchland, Damasio and Dennet, among many others) a systematic theoretical framework accounting for the subjective quality of experience is still lacking.

It is to address these unsurmounted problems in the modern conception of consciousness and subjectivity that I found relevant to present how two major Indian philosophic systems, Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism in the Madhyamaka school, have analyzed the relations between mind and world, and consciousness and phenomena. Both systems develop an ontology based on the claim of the absence of individual self. Advaita does so by affirming the identity of the self with the absolute *Brahman*, while Mahayana Buddhism denies its independent nature, and states that the essence of reality is *shunyata*, the void.

PART II

身是菩提樹	*The body is the tree of enlightenment*.
心如明鏡台	*The mind is the stand of a bright mirror.*
時時勤拂拭	*Wipe it constantly and with ever-watchful diligence*,
勿使惹塵埃	*To keep it uncontaminated by the worldly dust.*

Shen-hsiu, aspirant 6th Patriarch of Ch'an

菩提本無樹	*Enlightenment is no tree,*
明鏡亦非台	*Nor is the Bright Mirror a stand.*
本夾無一物	*Since it is not a thing at all,*
何處惹塵埃	*Where could the dust alight?*

Hui-neng, 6th Patriarch of Ch'an

1. HINDU SCHOOLS OF PHILOSOPHY

The different schools of Indian philosophy are based on the Shrutis, or the four Vedas (dating approximately 1500-500 BCE), which are considered revealed texts of divine origin. The Vedas are a collection of mystical literature and do not represent a systematic philosophical exposition on the nature of reality. Six schools of Indian philosophy, defined orthodox by their allegiance to the Vedas, developed these insights into coherent systems. These are: 1) the Nyaya; 2) the Vaiseshika; 3) the Samkhya; 4) the Yoga; 5) the Purva-Mimamsa; and 6) the Uttara-Mimamsa or Vedanta (Ranganathan in IEP, 2005). These schools are named the *Shad-Darsanas* or "true points of view", indicating different ways of contemplating reality, rather than six opposite philosophical standpoints.

The Nyaya is the school of logics, which elaborates what in Western epistemology are the theories of knowledge and justification, and can be seen as an Indian equivalent of Aristotelian logic and analytic tradition. The Vaiseshika analyzes the constituents of reality in terms of atoms, properties and categories. Samkhya is the dualist school and maintains an irreducible distinction between consciousness, or *Purusha*, and matter *Prakriti*. *Purusha* corresponds to the Self, universal soul or spirit, while *Prakriti* is an unconscious, primordial substance which modifications give rise to the manifest world. To the Samkhya School belongs the theory of the three *gunas*, or dispositions of matter, the unbalance of which gives rise to the manifestation. All modes of existence are analyzed in 24 different categories which comprise the intellect, mind and sense of self (*ahankara*) which are also seen as transient manifestations of *Prakriti*, and are thus distinct from *Purusha* (Haney 2002, 42). The Samkhya system therefore considers both body and mind as material (although *Prakriti* cannot be equated with the notion of matter in Western science). The cosmological view of the system holds that *Puruṣa*, the eternal pure consciousness, due to ignorance, identifies itself with the manifestations of *Prakriti* such as intellect (*buddhi*) and ego (*ahamkara*) and undergoes the process of transmigration and suffering. However, once the realisation arises that *Puruṣa* is distinct from *Prakriti*, the Self is no longer subject to transmigration and achieves absolute freedom (*mukti*) (Larson 1998, 13).

The Yoga system is based on Samkhya metaphysics and can be considered its implementation in terms of physical and mental practices, to bring about the discrimination between *Purusha* and *Prakriti*. Raja-Yogic practices focus on the restraint and control of the mind in order to reduce the "stains" or thoughts (*vritti*) of worldly objects, by means of which the individual soul attains union with the Self.

Purva, or *earlier* Mimamsa is a school dedicated to the interpretation of the Veda in its ritualistic aspects and develops commentaries on *e.g.* the performance of ritual actions (*karma*) and theories on the distribution of merits. It is not, therefore, a philosophy in itself but rather but an

exegetic exposition about the sacrificial activities and interpretations of canonical law for Brahmins.

Uttara-Mimamsa or Vedanta, is a philosophical system based on the Upanishads, which is a body of esoteric texts appeared in a large span of time, possibly beginning in 1000 BCE. The focus of the system is on pure intellectual knowledge (*jnana*) and could be seen arising in opposition to ritualism which had characterized Brahmanism's preoccupation with ritual action as means of spiritual advancement (the so called *karma marga*), (*cf.* Sarma 2011, 203).

1.1 Vedantic Philosophy

Vedanta is divided in three main schools: Dvaita, Visishtadvaita and Advaita, which most prominent philosophers are Madhva, Ramanuja and Shankara, respectively. These philosophies are not considered in opposition to each other, but rather as a hierarchy of points of view representing dualism, qualified monism and pure monism or nonduality. The final, absolute viewpoint which Vedanta advocates is expressed in Shankara's treatise *Vivekachudamani*, or "the crown jewel of discrimination", as: *"Brahman alone is real; the world is unreal; the individual soul is not different from Brahman*" (Sarma 2011). The focus of this exposition will be on this final philosophical standpoint, to which all other views are considered to subtend.

Shankara's philosophy is based upon the Upanishads, the Baghavad Gita and Brahmasutras, on which he wrote extensive commentaries based on logical, rational argumentation. These were later ampliated by numerous commentators and followers, so that the system developed over several centuries and reached its intellectual height by the end of the 16th century, approximately 700 to 800 years after Shankara (Gupta 2004, 120).

The focus of Shankara's work is to give a systematic account of consciousness (*cit)*, which is treated in the Upanishads in the context of explaining the nature of the Self (*atman*). The Self in Vedanta does not refer to the "empirical ego", as in Western philosophy, but rather indicates the "pure consciousness" underlying the phenomenal individual. Moreover, the Self is not assumed as a feature characteristic of separate individuals (*jiva-atman*), but is held as identical with Reality (*Brahman*) as the substance out of which all things are made (*ibid.,* 121). The identity *atman-Brahman* represents a fully-encompassing reality which does not leave room for something other, and is thus defined nondual (being "oneness" a positive determination liable of reifying the ineffable wholeness). Although unknowable in the representational way, the experience of reality is hinted at by the synthetic expression "*satchitananda*", indicating its three aspects of *sat* (being), *chit* (consciousness) and *ananda* (bliss), (*ibid*).

The underlying reality is therefore indescribable in language and unknowable in the traditional subject-object representational mode of knowledge. This, however, does not relegate the Self in a transcendental dimension because, as Shankara holds, a*tman* is self-evident (*Svatah-siddha*). The

proof for the Self is thus not established by external factors or rational discourse because "beingness" is that which is present in every cognitive act. The argument which Shankara advances is therefore similar to the Cartesian *cogito*, and that is, that it is not possible to deny the Atman, because its negation presupposes the existence of the one who denies it. While Descartes equates his being with a *res cogitans* (the equivalent, possibly, of *jivatman*), Advaita, on the other hand, denies its identity as a phenomenal thing, and holds that *atman* is *nir-vikalpa* (unqualified). The Self is therefore not equitable with the empirical ego, and its characteristics can only be expressed apophatically as non-corporeal, eternal, while at the same time immanent and undeniable.

In order to elucidate the claim of nonduality between *Brahman* and world, Shankara employs the Vedic concept of *maya*, which, although being popularly translated as "illusion", is described in his metaphysics as a process of superimposition of "names and forms" (*nama-rupa*) upon the immutable *Brahman* (Radakrishnan, in Loy 1988, 66). All differentiations are considered appearances upon the absolute reality through modification of perceptions by overlaying thought-projections (*vikalpa*). The Sanskrit term *vikalpa* is in fact a compound of the prefix *vi* (discrimination or bifurcation) and *kalpana* (mentally constructed), (Loy 1988, 43). This process of superimposition is strictly related to the activity of memory, which projects past experiences onto *Brahman*, giving rise to false perceptions and ignorance (*avidya*) of *Brahman*. This deceitfulness is illustrated in the traditional metaphor of mistaking a coiled rope for a snake, and is liable, according to Shankara, to produce the illusion of a multiplicity of selves, and, through "limiting adjuncts" (*upadhi*), of an individual self through identification with the body (Sharma 2011, 208).

If the former argument clarifies the appearance of ontological multiplicity (of selves), the claim of nonduality between *Brahman* and world needs still be assessed. Advaita's phenomenology of perception is different from the western, Husserlian one, and takes as starting point the conception of *chit*, or consciousness as self-luminous (and self-existing) (Gupta 2004, 121). The structure of consciousness, as is usually intended in Western philosophy is intentional, in the sense that it implies a subject-object relation. In Shankara's philosophy, consciousness is described as the ultimate subject of every cognitive act, which has the capacity of manifesting all phenomena upon which it focuses. Consciousness, or Self, is provisionally thought of as always opposed to the non-self as the subject to the object, and is described in such guise as a *witnessing consciousness* (*sakshin*). Shankara, however, ultimately refutes the "relational" structure of consciousness, together with the dualist stance that a split between witness and phenomena would imply (such as that of the Samkhya system), and claims instead that the universe *be* the Self (Loy 1988, 197). The apparent paradox in this phenomenological description is of great importance in the understanding of the Advaitic claim of nonduality. The relational model of

phenomenological experience presents consciousness as a subject, either empirical or transcendental, which experiences a world separate from itself. The notion of subjectivity itself implies a reification of consciousness into a "cognizing essence", such as a *purusha*, which, however deprived of characteristics, as the non-qualified *Brahman*, is liable of being reified into some "thing". Shankara, however, maintains that object-directedness itself is a *vikalpa* superimposition of thought-process upon consciousness (Gupta 2004, 125). Thus, for Shankara consciousness is not a possession of the ego, and is both without object and without subject. Intentionality is also a mere appearance superimposed upon non-intentional consciousness (*ibid.*). The nondual reality is identified, in Advaitic ontology, as the *Atman-Brahman*, a self-luminous consciousness not knowable in itself, not separable from its manifestation, but also not reducible to it, as the whole is not the mere sum of its parts. In the following paragraph, this conception will be contrasted to the Buddhist claim that the ultimate essence of reality is *shunyata*, the emptiness.

2. BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY

Buddhist philosophy can be considered a set of metaphysical doctrines centered upon ridding devotees of bad "cognitive habits" leading to *dukkha* (suffering) and rebirth (Sarma 2011, 14). After the death of Siddhartha Gautama in the 5th-6th century BCE, doctrinal disputes arose leading to a splintering into a variety of schools, which encompass an ample range of philosophical and religious standpoints, and are presently grouped under three main denominations: Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. Theravada represents the modern designation of the first schools arisen in the 3rd century BCE, historically referred to as *Hinayana* (lesser vehicle). Mahayana (great vehicle) identifies the schools arisen from the northern spreading of Buddhism in China, Korea, Southeast Asia, Japan and Tibet in the 1st to 10th century ca. Vajrayana is usually considered a branch of Mahayana, present mostly in Tibet and characterized by its tantric practices.

All Buddhist schools have nonetheless in common their succession lineages and observance to the doctrines ascribed to the historical figure of Siddhartha Gautama. The early speeches of the founder, which are summarized in the four noble truths and the eightfold path, constitute a set of basic tenets to which all schools adhere. The four noble truths are in a nutshell: 1) there is suffering; 2) it has a source; 3) it can end; 4) there is a path that leads to its end.

The main cause of suffering is "attachment" to things, which is considered delusionary, since all objects are transient (*sarvam anityam*). This philosophic stance is held both toward the notion of a personal self, and also toward things in general, which are considered deprived of substance (in the Aristotelian sense). The psychological constitution of the "sentient being" is an association of

five aggregates (*skandhas*). These are described as mental forms and dispositions, which are classified as: *rupa* (form) *vedana* (feeling), *samjna* (perception) *samskaras* (thought constructs) and *vijnana* (consciousness), (*ibid.* 15).

The consideration of the transitory nature of the world led Gautama to formulate the doctrine of *anatman* (no-self), arguably in polemic, or as a restatement of the Hindu notion of *atman*, or "all-self". A second foundational doctrine of early Buddhism is that of "interdependent origination" (*pratityasamutpada*) which holds that everything arises in dependence upon multiple causes and conditions. No *causa sui* object or entity can thus be admitted, because the causal chain leading to any event must include the universe as a whole. This doctrine therefore, reconnects itself to that of *anatman* by claiming that it is not possible to identify an independent, inherently existing self. A third mainstay of Buddhism is the principle of emptiness (*shunyata*). This concept is given different emphasis and meaning in the various Buddhist schools, but is generally understood as an ultimate (conceptual) definition of reality, referring to the absence of inherent essence of phenomena, or to the non-self nature of the five aggregates.

Buddhist epistemology analyzes therefore the relationship between consciousness and phenomena taking a different starting point than Advaita and Western epistemology, and emphasizes the nondual quality of *shunya* as encompassing a world of interconnected phenomena lacking independent existence. An instance of the classic distinction between the phenomenal world and an immutable reality "behind it", similar to that of the Western metaphysical tradition, (from Parmenides through Kant), can, however, be found in the Pali Canon's Fire Sermon, where an injunction is made to develop aversion to sense-organs, sense-objects, sense-contact and sense-consciousness (Loy 1988, 38). This conception can be seen as related to the ideal of *arhat* of early Buddhism (and Hinduism), as a saint with miraculous power and ascetic temperament (Bond in Kieckhefer & Bond 1988, 160), and possibly exerted a considerable influence on the development of monastic and ascetic currents. This notion shows a close affinity with the Hindu dualist systems (the Samkhya and Yoga) which endorse renunciation through rejection of sensory experiencing as a way of approaching ultimate reality.

This ideal is nonetheless contradicted elsewhere, in Buddhism, such as in one of the Pali Canon's *Honeyball suttas*, which maintains a phenomenal (nondual) epistemology as the hallmark of *nirvana* (awakening): "in the seen there will just be the seen, in the heard, just the heard; in smelling, touching, tasting, just smelling, touching, tasting; in the cognized, just the cognized" (Loy 1988, 39). This view rehabilitates sense-perception as not being problematic per se, and indicates the way of phenomenological renunciation endorsed in the Fire Sermon (suppression of *skhandas*), as perhaps, at most, a preliminary method of inquiry into the nature of subjectivity, rather than an ultimate philosophic view on the nature of reality.

In order to provide a very general characterization of contemporary Buddhism and distinguish between the two major traditions of Theravada and Mahayana, it could be stated that Theravada maintains generally a dualistic view of awakening, where *nirvana* is seen as something radically different from the everyday world that can be perceived by the senses; Mahayana, on the other hand, endorses a nondual view and holds that *nirvana* and *samsara* (the world of transmigration and suffering) are experiences of the same reality viewed from different standpoints. Mahayana philosophy furthermore, through the worldlier ideal of Bodhisattva (*cf.* Lopez in Kieckhefer & Bond 1988, 179), does not advocate the elimination of phenomenal experience, and lays instead emphasis on the non-conceptual nature of reality, where the essence of phenomena (including oneself) is that of illusory thought constructs. In this essay, the choice will be to focus upon the Mahayana tradition, and particularly on the Madhyamaka school, on the basis of its deconstruction of metaphysics of substance (of all things, or *dharmas*) and on its ascribing ultimate reality to the ineffable *shunya*.

2.1 Madhyamaka Philosophy

Mahayana Buddhism is divided into two major schools, the Yogacara and Madhyamaka. Yogacara, which has its roots in the 4th century CE, is an idealist school which emphasizes the mental nature of perceptions, maintaining that everything is *cittamatra* (mind-only), (Sarma 2011, 20). This system focuses on the implementation of the doctrine of emptiness through yogic practices, as the name suggests, and does not develop a thorough philosophic system, being the first-hand experience of *shunyata* the main goal of the school. The Madhyamaka, or middle-way school, was founded by Nagarjuna in the 2nd century CE and exerted an enormous influence on Mahayana Buddhism in lands such as China, Japan, Korea, Vietman, *etc.* coming to be considered, in Tibetan doxographical literature as the philosophically definitive expression of Buddhist doctrine (Arnold in IEP, 2005).

Nagarjuna's philosophy is based on the *prajnaparamita* literature (the perfection of transcendental wisdom), which appeared in India around the first century CE. These texts, at the base of Mahayana, represented a further development from the previous Buddhist philosophical teaching of the *Abhidharma*. This teaching was considered nonetheless propedeutic for the understanding of the *prajnaparamita*. The prominent feature of Madhyamaka philosophy is the confutation that *dharmas*, (all phenomenal manifestations constituents of things which make up the *skhandas* or the totality of human experience), possess substantial existence. These factors were held in *Abhidharma* literature, as ultimately real entities endowed with inherent existence (*svabhava*). Nagarjuna criticized this "ontologizing" of phenomena by maintaining that the causal dependence expressed in the *pratityasamutpada* doctrine pertained also the *dharmas*,

(since everything lacks independence). Even the notion of *shunya*, on the other end, would not escape this principle, and was thus understood to be dependently originated (Sarma 2011, 21).

Nagarjuna's dialectical method is based on the demonstration of the relativity of all concepts, by showing their dependence upon their opposites. The paradoxical character of this doctrine (or no-doctrine) emerges in Nagarjuna's refusal to reify any philosophical position, including his own. He, therefore, does not provide any positive definitions of reality, but assumes the task of dismantling all other philosophical positions. As he expresses in his foundational text, the *Mulamadhyamakakarikas*: "The spiritual conquerors proclaimed emptiness to be the exhaustion of all theories and views. Those for whom emptiness is itself a theory, they declare to be incurable" (quoted in Loy 1998, 20). The concern of the author is thus to avoid "conceptual extremes" and to tread a middle way between them, in order to avoid the philosophical fallacies of reification and nihilism alike. In the case of *dharmas*, these are held as neither existing in themselves, nor as non-existing. The dichotomy *nirvana-samsara*, of major importance in Buddhist soteriology, is also similarly deconstructed and understood to be empty (*shunya*). Emptiness must, in final analysis, also be understood as empty of itself.

The ruthless application of the doctrine of interdependence allows therefore Nagarjuna to overcome the philosophical problems connected with asserting a monism which substantiates either *shunya* or the *dharmas* (representing a polarity akin to consciousness and phenomena) in the attempt to define what ultimate reality is. Because of the interdependence of the terms, neither can be established as having its own independent nature, being or substance.

The goal of Madhyamaka is nonetheless soteriological and aimed at the attainment of a "higher truth" (*paramartha*) which although not describable (being descriptions conceptual superimpositions upon reality), can be experienced. The purpose of negating the autonomous character of opposites and rejection of essentialism implies, for Nagarjuna, the experience of a reality which excludes any theorizing about it. Its nondual character lies in the impossibility of abstracting an observer from it, and still less to formulate an ontology of separate, autonomous entities. As Loy suggests: "All philosophical views are attempts to grasp the nature of this nondual experience from the conceptual and hence dualistic standpoint" (1998, 272).

The subject-object relation in Madhyamaka is, in such guise, thoroughly deconstructed through the negation of self, of inherently existing (mind-independent) phenomena and, finally, of a transcendental "container" of phenomenal appearances (*shunyata*). This is the standpoint viewed as "highest", and represents the essence of Madhyamaka Buddhism. The ultimate response to the question about the nature of reality is thus for Nagarjuna, (as for Wittgenstein), to remain silent.

3. COMPARISON BETWEEN ADVAITA AND MADHYAMAKA

The two Indian philosophic systems analyzed, present two apparently antithetic conceptions of reality defined either as nondual, or as empty. These systems present however, noteworthy similarities which must be contextualized in the dialectical interaction which the two cultures have historically entertained.

In order to understand the "core doctrine", (*sec.* Loy), which can be extracted from these systems, it is necessary to keep in mind that Advaita is an orthodox Hindu philosophy committed to the theistic notion of Brahman. This concept was, however, restated by Shankara through the discrimination between *saguna Brahman* (or *Ishvara*, rather similar to the Western notion of God) and the transcendental, attribute-less *nirguna Brahman*, akin to the Neoplatonic One, and representing the philosophical infinite. Buddhism developed in reaction to the Brahmanic religion and against the supremacy of the priestly cast and proposed itself, instead, as a non-theistic "doctrine of liberation", with both social and spiritual connotations.

Given the historical contrapositions of these religious philosophies, it is understandable that their expositions developed from two opposite positions, to arrive arguably at the same understanding of reality. The common standpoint of these systems is the absence of personal self and the assertion of the existence of an ineffable reality underlying the world of distinctions and multiplicity. This is achieved in Advaita, through the expansion of the Self into a universal principle encompassing all reality, and the denial of the substantial nature of beings and objects; in Buddhism, through the deconstruction of the self and the conflation of the subject into the phenomenal objects. If, however, these philosophies are to advance not merely a monist, but a nondual thesis, these standpoints must be further elaborated upon.

Advaita stresses the nature of Brahman, provisionally, as a "witnessing consciousness" or ultimate subjectivity, which can never know itself because it is the knower. The existence of this principle cannot be empirically demonstrated but is, nonetheless, intuitively known by the sheer fact that existence is happening. This *Brahman*-consciousness, however, does not amount to a subjective idealism, and Advaita stresses that the intentional structure of consciousness (*i.e.*, the opposition subject-object) is a mental construct superimposed on the nondual *Brahman* (reality). The witnessing awareness, or sense of being, cannot be conceptualized (represented) neither experienced, and does not belong to an individual consciousness. From this fact, derives the claim that consciousness encompasses everything, as a formless, empty space. This is conveyed in the Upanishad through the identification of *akasha* (ether, the fifth, non manifested element) with *Brahman*.

Madhyamaka Buddhism, on the other hand, eliminates the notion of subjectivity by maintaining that the constituents of phenomenal experience (*skhandas*) do not amount to a personal self, being impermanent and lacking independent existence. Ultimate reality comes thus to be

described as emptiness. This term, however, is always relative to its opposite, form (phenomena). Just as consciousness is an interrelational function inseparable from what is considered to be its object, likewise in the Heart Sutra it is stated that "*emptiness is not other than form; form is not other than emptiness*". Emptiness therefore cannot be substantialized as an independent reality and cannot be conceived as an essence separate from phenomena, just like space is only such due to the appearance of objects within it.

Through this conception it can be seen now how the definition of ultimate reality as s*hunyata* and *Brahman* may possibly be two ways of describing the same nondual experience from different angles. On the one hand consciousness is the whole, and phenomena are temporary appearances within it (Advaita). On the other, consciousness is *no thing* and only phenomena appear, although these never exist independently as substantial entities (Mahayana Buddhism). In the first case, ontological reality is given to an immutable essence underlying all change. In the latter, only an interdependent and impermanent flow of change exists, and no ontological conclusions can be drawn from it.

The dialectical relationship between these two philosophies reflects the different standpoints of being and becoming. In spite of being a concern only of Eastern, "mystical" traditions, these conceptions are present also in Western philosophy and find their parallel in the debate between Parmenides and Heraclitus, with which this essay started. The next chapter will address the relevance of the nondual perspective for modern Western philosophy's discussion on the nature of consciousness, self and subjectivity.

4. DISCUSSION

Philosophic inquiries about the nature of reality in Western culture, have traditionally taken two major alleys. One is the idealistic current, which starts with the internal world of the self or the transcendental, non-manifest being, and denies the reality and/or independent existence of the material world in respect to that principle. Ultimate reality, according to this standpoint, is the mind, while physical reality is considered a mind-dependent, immaterial construct.

The second is realism, which is the epistemological view which holds that a mind-independent world exists, comprising a plurality of things and beings whose properties and phenomenal qualities are inherent in themselves. The mind, in this system, is regarded as originating from matter (physicalism) and produced by brain activity through some correspondence between biochemical processes in the brain and mental events.

Both philosophic traditions, in their strong variants, represent an attempt to formulate a monistic account of reality by reducing it to a mental or material substance respectively. The rejection of

substance-dualism represents a common trend in modern philosophy which avoids the problems of interaction between substances (*e.g.* mind and body).

One fundamental challenge arises, however, for each system. If idealism is to have any practical purpose, it should escape the equation of consciousness with subjectivity as it would lead to solipsism, and explain its relation to the external world without refuting commonsense knowledge about it. Realism, on the other hand, should overcome the problems of representationalism created by the dichotomy consciousness-phenomena, without simply negating the former, and reconcile the metaphysical subject-object gap which such view implies. Nondual philosophies such as Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism may provide a solution, I maintain, to these epistemological problems. In the following paragraph I will try to review both idealist and realist accounts, and present the cognitive perspective of a "nondual epistemology".

4.1 Idealism, Realism and Nonduality

Idealism recognizes the importance of the human "structure of consciousness," granted by the psychosomatic apparatus in determining the conditions of experience. From Kant onward, the importance of the a priori forms of sensibility could not be ignored in the formulation of epistemological theories. This amounts to assert that the human sensory system does not simply perceive an external world, but is actively involved in its phenomenological manifestation. The world may in fact be considered as an infinite range of phenomenological possibilities (extended for example, for the sense of sight, to the whole electromagnetic spectrum), which are subjectively realized by each organism under the conditions given by its different physiology, (which varies moreover from a species to another). The spatial appearance of the world, objects and their sensitive qualities can also be understood, according to the idealist critique, as manifestations of consciousness, or transcendental ego, which encompasses them. Strong versions of idealism take an anti-realist stance toward sensible objects, which are considered misty, unsubstantial and wholly dependent on perception by mind. If the latter is equated, however, with subjectivity, as in some phenomenological interpretations, this would reiterate the subject-object duality between the empty container and its intentional objects or, in theology, between God and the world.

Realist philosophies have, until recently, dismissed subjectivity entirely and directed their focus toward the objective world, endorsing materialism in a pragmatic support of the natural sciences. Behaviorism attempted to reduce the subjective point of view to an objective one, by studying consciousness empirically, through a third-person perspective. After the decline of this project, since the 1950's, consciousness returned in the analytic philosophy's discourse in the theories of Functionalism and later Cognitive Science. Modern theories of consciousness are materialistic

and resort to a number of disciplines such as neurophysiology, artificial intelligence and cognitive psychology to account for the functions of consciousness. Consciousness is, however, never considered "in itself", but as brought into momentary existence by dynamic processes such as memory, learning, cognition, *etc*., which should be rather analyzed as representing the intentional functions of consciousness. These theories constitute therefore a reduction of consciousness to "mind phenomena," or of the cognizing aspect of consciousness to its content. In psychology, this misunderstanding manifests in the confusion between consciousness and self-consciousness, or ego, and the identification of what can be now understood as an intentional structure or *vikalpa* thought-construction, with the "pure" consciousness, or *beingness*, without which no such structures could arise. Only recently, in analytic philosophy it has been noted that these mental functions are to be considered "easy" problems in terms of neurological understanding (*sec.* David Chalmers) in comparison with the much more mysterious event of consciousness itself, or why *qualia* (*e.g.* pain or the experience of sight) are at all experienced. If, therefore, a dualistic conception of consciousness is to be rejected, consciousness should not be equated neither with the empirical ego, nor with transcendental ego (a rather misfortunate expression, although much more refined, it could be argued).

It is timely, at this point, to introduce the nondual conception of consciousness, as it emerges from the "core theory" presented in Advaitic and Mahayana Buddhist philosophy. Consciousness is referred to in Advaita as the "sense of being" which has to be understood not as a state of mind activity referencing the ego, but as a non-conceptual ground upon which such activity is cognized. This "principle of consciousness" cannot be comprehended or grasped through an intentional (object-directed) act, because it is prior to it. No empirical "proof" of it can be therefore given, but none is necessary either, for Shankara, insofar as to doubt it presupposes the cognition of such event by that very essence. This principle is called in Advaita the Self, which is said to be equal with the unqualified, absolute *Brahman*. The "personal" dimension of experience is thus transcended and integrated into the universal principle.

Buddhism, analogously, analyzes the concept of personal existence as fallacious, because it can be reduced to the interplay of phenomena (the five aggregates) which lack permanence and inherent existence. Ultimate reality is, on the other hand, not to be equated with a "higher Self", as this concept is prone to be reified into some inherently existing ontological principle, but should be rather emptied of all ontological claims to be experienced in its facticity (*tathata*).

Nagarjuna, furthermore, states that consciousness is not to be analyzed as an ultimate principle separate from phenomena, because it arises interdependently with them, as the passage from the Hart Sutra quoted before states. If this position seems to rehabilitate the phenomenological understanding of intentionality, (interdependence of subject-object), and even cognitive theories,

it should be remembered that this momentary and interdependent phenomenon of consciousness does not arise for a subject beholding a world, but for or as the impermanent flux of s*hunyata*.

By way of a conclusion of this study, it may be useful to conjecture, in practice, what the nondual cognitive perspective could amount to, since its soteriological implications are the sole purpose and concern of these spiritual traditions.

A widely accepted Western-world view holds consciousness as being the propriety of an entity which experiences the body and internal states. The ego, however, is substantialized by the reflective activity of thought, which at some point of the intellectual development, become self-referencing ("I am thinking"). This process grounds itself on a seemingly continuous self, which is the conceptualization of a personal essence based on the association of the sense of being (consciousness) with the body. Experiences, thoughts and mental states are thus interpreted as occurring to a self, and this dualism is extensively supported by the use of language structured in an intentional way. Underlying this dualistic mental activity is, however, the neurological unity of perception, which is due to a reciprocal interaction between the organic physiology and the material conditions of the world, giving rise to phenomenal experience. Various ontological meanings have been given to the nondual view in philosophical and religious traditions, such as wholeness, emptiness or God's grace, although no philosophical description can capture it. The pre-conceptual, cognitive nature of this primordial mind is hinted at in Indian nondual traditions with expressions such as space-like awareness or Buddha-mind.

5. CONCLUSION

Western culture has grown largely oblivious of the metaphysics of consciousness, present in Eastern philosophies, as well as in its own philosophic and theological genealogy. This was historically motivated by an attempt to come to an objective description of reality and by the need to abandon superstition, mysticism and religious narratives in which the issue was shrouded. The empiricist/realist account of the world in terms of individual bodies and material substances ignored thus consciousness, and came, in time, to consider it an epiphenomenal outgrowth of matter. This attitude produced a tension between scientific and humanistic disciplines, which have been traditionally more sensitive to the relational aspect of knowledge, implying a being in the world which has to include a degree of subjectivity in the reciprocal interaction between opposites (*e.g.* knower and known, reader and text). The awareness of subjectivity has sometimes, perhaps, in continental philosophy, slipped into the solipsism of considering the world as deriving from a subjective mind.

Western philosophy starts from a duality of substances, the mental (conscious) and the material (unconscious), and alternatively eliminates one in favor of the other to arrive at monism. The rather recent reintroduction of consciousness in the scientific debate has resulted in clumsy attempts to explain the relations between subjectivity and the world in epistemology and cognitive studies.

Conceptual impasses in classical problems of Western philosophy, such as the mind-body and consciousness-matter relations find a philosophically coherent resolution in nondual traditions such as Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism. Nondual philosophies assert not a subjective idealism, but the lack of any subject owning an individualized consciousness. The experience of subjectivity and selfhood is considered a thought-based, fictional construction superimposed onto the nondual reality. This perspective, however, is admitted not only theoretically, and practical means are devised in these traditions for the realization of this insight. This theory is meant, therefore, to be not just a philosophical expedient, but an experiential realization bringing about a sense of freedom from psychological constraints.

The theory herewith presented, I argue, is consistent with modern scientific notions of *e.g.* neurology, ecology and sociology which see the human organism embedded in a deterministic, interrelated web of matter, energy and information represented by its natural and social environment. If the striving after objectivity led such disciplines to reject ontological assumptions such as the disembodied self, the rediscovered importance of the role of the observer in scientific theories hints to the possibility that the nondual analysis of consciousness as co-arising with the natural world may represent a viewpoint compatible (and predating) the scientific-empirical.

These conclusions offer, I believe, also an important perspective on the much debated issue of the phenomenological import of religious experiences, which constitutes a focus of lively academic discussion. Considering consciousness as a private sphere of incommunicable, subjective experiencing, led post-essentialist scholars to relegate eschatological accounts to the sphere of faith. The analysis of consciousness proposed by nondual traditions, instead, exalts the subjective perspective to the point of its pantheistic coincidence with Nature, which reveals itself as the synthesis between objectivity and subjectivity, and of realism with idealism. This is, I believe, the contribution that religious philosophy can make to bridge the gap between the empirical and the subjective approaches to knowledge and wisdom.

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